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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1147
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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2160
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0043
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RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0608

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENTIANE 000329

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TAGS: [CASC](#) [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KN](#) [KS](#) [KPAO](#) [LA](#)
SUBJECT: NORTH KOREAN CHILDREN: INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION
COMPLICATES EFFORTS TO SECURE RELEASE

REF: VIENTIANE 323

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia M. Haslach. Reason: 1.4 b and d.

11. (S) Summary: The South Korean Embassy continues to press the Lao government for the release of the three North Korean children detained in November. They are seeking a meeting with the Director General for Consular Affairs at the Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who has expressed hope for a resolution during the week of April 23. The Lao government, according to the South Koreans, is trying to arrange a solution that will not damage the country's relations with North Korea. Three Korean-Americans called on the Embassy's Political/Economic Chief today and said that they had come to Vientiane at the behest of an unnamed refugee assistance organization in order to try to take the children to the United States -- a plan they have shared with the Lao police. The Pol/Econ Chief told them that involvement by Americans is likely to complicate the children's situation. Meanwhile, international attention continues -- a British journalist filed a story from Vientiane, and the Ambassador received a letter from Senator Murray urging the Embassy to take action. The escalating public attention, now including the physical presence of at least one foreign journalist and the Korean-Americans in Vientiane, is likely to further complicate the delicate negotiations the South Koreans are pursuing, which still represent the best hope for the children's release and resettlement. End summary.

Update from South Korean Embassy

12. (C) The DCM called South Korean Counsellor Miyon Lee April 23 for an update on the three North Korean children who have been detained since November 2006. Ms. Lee said that the children are still in detention, but she hopes for a resolution soon. She said that Foreign Minister Thongloun Sisoulith had assigned Vice Foreign Minister Phongsavath Bouptha to handle the issue. However, he is currently out of the country and has left Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Director General for Consular Affairs Rangsy Kongsaysy responsible. The South Korean embassy has requested a meeting with Mr. Rangsy for April 23 or 24. According to Ms. Lee, Mr. Rangsy hopes to resolve the issue within the week. She said that the MFA is trying to resolve the issue in a way that does not damage Laos's relationship with North Korea. (Note: During a previous conversation (Reftel), Ms. Lee said that the Lao government is making it a condition of the children's release) presumably at the behest of the North Koreans) that they not be resettled in the United States. End note.)

Korean-Americans in Vientiane to Try to Help

13. (S) The Pol-Econ Chief met on April 23 with three Korean-Americans from Texas who had arrived in Vientiane several days before. One is a professor at a college near El Paso and is Pastor of a Korean-American church in El Paso; the others are members of his congregation. The professor, who served as the group's spokesman, had called the Embassy to say that he had a letter from the Senate for the Ambassador and wanted to meet with an Embassy staff member to discuss the three children. (Note: he did not provide a copy of the letter.)

14. (S) The spokesman said that the three had been invited to go to Vientiane by someone linked to the network moving North Koreans through Laos. Once in Vientiane, they were taken to meet with a district police officer on April 20. They offered to act as "guardians" for the three children if the GOL would release them. Asked what their plans would be for the children, they told the police officer they would take them back to the United States. They added they would be happy to pay whatever "fines" might be involved. The police officer asked to make copies of their passports for his records.

15. (S) The Pol/Econ Chief told the group that any involvement by Americans in this case was likely to be counterproductive. A formal statement that potential guardians would like to take them to the United States was likely to complicate the situation. Likewise, any attempt by the Embassy to push publicly for the release of the three children would likely make the situation more difficult. They asked what might happen if the children were in fact

VIENTIANE 00000329 002 OF 002

released to their custody: how would they be processed for entrance to the United States? The Pol/Econ Chief said that a decision on the children's eventual resettlement would likely be part of a resettlement process which would have to be worked out under the auspices of the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Bangkok.

16. (S) The group asked if it would be advisable for them to meet with Mr. Kato, the Japanese activist who has publicized the case in the international press. The Pol/Econ Chief advised against this. The spokesman expressed concern about being the subject of violence from North Korean agents in Vientiane. The Pol/Econ chief said that security in Laos is the responsibility of the Lao police. He advised the group to register at the Embassy's American Citizen Services section (which they had not done by COB April 23). He requested that the group call him the next day for a follow-up meeting.

Continued Press Interest

17. (SBU) We see that this story continues to receive wide coverage in the international press. Sunday Times of London Far East Correspondent Michael Sheridan filed a report from Vientiane that ran in the April 22 issue. He says in the report that he went to the North Korean Embassy to inquire about the children, but guards slammed the door in his face. The Embassy has not received any inquiries from the press about the children.

Congressional Inquiry

18. (SBU) The Embassy received a letter from Senator Patty Murray of Washington saying that several constituents had contacted her office to express concern about the children. The letter says, "In light of the grave nature of these circumstances, I would like to ask that the Embassy strongly consider taking action to prevent the three children from being deported to North Korea." The Embassy has prepared a

draft response and sent it to EAP/MLS for clearance.

Comment

19. (S) We hope that the South Korean Embassy manages to negotiate the children's release quickly, since escalating international attention) and now the physical presence in Laos of international press and Korean-Americans) will only complicate the situation. What is especially troubling about the Korean-Americans' arrival is the fact that the South Korean network moving North Koreans through Laos has apparently decided that manipulating trusting and uninformed Korean-Americans into coming to Vientiane to become involved in trying to resolve this case would be an advantage. We believe, on the contrary, that this maneuver is likely to backfire on every front: making resolution of the fate of the three children absolutely more difficult; undercutting the efforts of the South Korean Embassy to find a quiet solution; and endangering the Korean-Americans either by getting them arrested or possibly subject to violence from the North Korean Embassy here. The Korean network has never taken this step in the past to our knowledge, and we are concerned that those involved believe it would somehow be helpful at this time. If the three Korean-Americans contact us again, we will advise them to leave Laos in the interest of their own safety and that of the three detained children.

HASLACH